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Low wages, student debt drive shortages in behavioral health workforce, experts say

Many jobs that require a master's degree or higher pay relatively low wages, which drives turnover

OLYMPIA — Low wages and high student debt levels are driving shortages and turnover among counselors, social workers, psychologists and other behavioral health workers in Washington, a new report shows.

[Experts recommend](#) state lawmakers consider two strategies to fight the ongoing shortage in Washington's behavioral health workforce: Help raise wages and address student loan debt. A recent report shows some mental health counselors have average loan debt of \$145,000, and make about \$59,000 a year, for example.

These strategies were recommended by the [Behavioral Health Workforce Advisory Committee](#) in a [new report](#). The committee includes many of the state's leading behavioral health care experts and is one of several that advises Washington leaders on current workforce challenges and solutions.

Washington's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board (Workforce Board) has led efforts to address behavioral health workforce barriers since 2016 and manages this advisory committee.

Demand for drug and alcohol counseling and mental health services has increased since the pandemic. At the same time, a lack of providers has made access to this care difficult for many Washington families.

The report recommends:

- Address low wages by advocating for increased Medicaid reimbursement rates and a new statewide reimbursement plan for services funded by the federal government. This model, if adopted, would help behavioral health clinics raise wages for counselors and social workers, for example.

- Boost state funding for behavioral health education loan repayment programs.
- Increase state funding to administer and evaluate the Washington Health Corps program, which includes the loan repayment program.
- Require employers and state officials to provide more information about the federal [Public Service Loan Forgiveness program](#) to help qualifying health care workers have their federal loans forgiven after 10 years.
- After studying results of a pilot project, fund scholarships for behavioral health students who agree to work in facilities that serve Washington residents with the greatest needs after graduation.
- Increase awareness that providers who work in community settings such as homeless shelters and supportive housing can count those hours toward loan repayment programs.

“Wages and student loan debt are major barriers to solving Washington’s behavioral health workforce shortage,” says Eleni Papadakis, executive director of the state’s Workforce Board. **“Community clinics in rural and underserved areas are especially impacted. This means less help for Washington families when and where they need it the most. Addressing this challenge requires more than investing in loan repayment programs. We need a comprehensive strategy to both retain our current workforce and reduce the cost of education for students considering this field.”**

The report also analyzed the results of the state’s investment to strengthen the behavioral health workforce in recent years.

The state has twice moved to increase federal Medicaid reimbursement rates; increased investments in the student loan repayment program for behavioral health providers; provided relief funds for community-based clinics; and created new programs to help primary care doctors connect with mental health experts and other resources to help patients.

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About the Workforce Board:

The Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board is a partnership of business, labor and government dedicated to helping Washington residents succeed in family-wage jobs, while meeting employer needs for skilled workers.

The Board’s vision is that every Washington community is thriving, inclusive and economically resilient. Learn more at www.wtb.wa.gov.